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ABSTRACT

The argument between advocates of the whole language approach and the phonics approach threatens to become so polarized and politicized that agreeing on a middle ground seems at times impossible, and the voices of reason and experience are drowned out. The debate erupted anew in California after alarming news stories about reading scores ranked the state's fourth graders next to last in reading proficiency among the 39 states participating--even though most informed observers agree that state-by-state comparisons of average scores mean little without taking into account the racial and economic status of the students. Critics of whole language claim that it allows some children to fall through the cracks, while the argument against phonics is that it is boring. As researchers debate the significance of the studies and test results, teachers are left hanging. Increasingly, researchers are finding better results from teachers who take a balanced approach, especially with children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Three different schools (inner-city and suburban public schools and two affiliated single-sex independent schools) in the Boston, Massachusetts area offer evidence that experienced teachers using a middle-of-the-road approach succeed in teaching beginners to read. Scholars have begun to call for consensus on the balanced approach. It is time for the debate to cool down and for advocates on both sides to recognize the wisdom of teaching "what works." (RS)

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THE GREAT READING DEBATE

Whole Language or Phonics? Teachers and Researchers Find the Middle Ground Most Fertile

As the debate between advocates of the two methods becomes more strident, evidence from research and practice points to a balanced approach

BY BARBARA MATSON

In her new book, *The Alphabetic Labyrinth*, Johanna Drucker recounts ancient beliefs about literacy. The Arabs, she writes, believed that Allah himself taught Adam to write. She does not say if Allah used a phonics or a whole-language approach.

Educators and academics have been arguing since Adam, it seems, about how best to teach reading, the most basic building block in a child's education. "If you fail in reading," says Jeanne Chall, professor emerita at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, "you fail in almost everything else."

Across North America, large numbers of children are having trouble with reading; many are being diagnosed with learning disabilities or reading disorders. The 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) school reading scores (released in April 1995) show only a third of fourth-graders reading at proficiency levels.

For decades now, what is sometimes called the Great Reading Debate has raged between advocates of two main philosophies of reading instruction: the whole-language method, which emphasizes reading for meaning, the use of children's literature instead of basal readers and worksheets, and the teaching of skills in the context of reading; versus the phonics or code-oriented approach, which emphasizes direct instruction in letter-sound relationships and patterns. The evidence from research—and the testimony of expert teachers—increasingly points to the conclusion that *neither* method by itself is as effective as a balanced approach that combines the two.

Instead of reaching consensus, however, the combatants have become more strident. Every time a new test shows falling reading scores, each camp claims the other side's influence is creating a crisis in the schools. Some conservative critics regard whole language as feel-good, fuzzy-headed liberal nonsense. Some liberals, in turn, view the attack on whole language as part of a strategy to destroy public education.

The argument threatens to become so polarized and politicized that agreeing on a middle ground seems at times impossible, and the voices of reason and experience are drowned out.

Back to Basics

The debate erupted anew last year in California after alarming news stories about the NAEP scores ranked the state's fourth-graders next to last in reading proficiency among the 39 states participating—even though most informed observers agree that state-by-state comparisons of average scores mean little without taking into account the racial and economic status of the students. California had adopted a whole-language approach for teaching language arts in 1987. The state legislature, reacting to the test scores, unanimously passed a new law scrapping whole language and ordering an emphasis on phonics. "Back to basics," said the politicians and the parents. A report on the television show "20/20" on October 13, 1995, added fuel to the

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fire, attributing the poor results in California to whole-language teaching and concluding that the method simply doesn't work.

Advocates of whole language say the California test results are misleading, and that blaming poor scores on whole language ignores the state's growing bilingual population, its poor funding of schools, its large class sizes. Others argue that it's not the approach, it's the practitioners.

Many scholars thought whole-language versus phonics arguments were over.

California never meant to drop phonics from its reading instruction program, according to Glen Thomas, director of curriculum frameworks for the California Department of Education. But teachers and administrators misunderstood, believing that adopting a whole-language philosophy meant abandoning phonics. "We never intended to get away from basics," Thomas says. "In our effort to have stronger literature, to get children to write more, we weren't giving enough attention to beginning reading. And their weaknesses were not showing up until fourth grade, which is too late."

Many scholars thought the whole-language versus phonics arguments were over. Research summaries by Jeanne Chall in 1967 (*Learning to Read: The Great Debate*, updated in 1983) and by psychologist Marilyn Jager Adams in 1990 (*Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print*) seemed to establish that some sort of direct phonics instruction was essential, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds with little or no preschool exposure to reading and for children with cognitive disabilities (see "School Influences on the Reading Development of Low-Income Children," *HEL*, January 1988).

At the same time, whole language brought many exciting changes to classrooms: an emphasis on early writing, the use of real children's literature for reading, and a variety of activities encouraging kids to generate projects arising from their own questions about the world around them. But often these innovations came at the expense of phonics.

Is Reading Natural?

The whole-language approach—and the term is so slippery that in 1990 one researcher devoted an entire study to reviewing the literature for definitions—views reading acquisition as a natural process, comparable to learning to talk. Many research studies have shown this is not so, that learning to read is not natural. "All the world speaks," Chall points out, "but only half of the world can read. Reading is not God-given. It is manmade. It has to be taught."

Advocates of phonics believe children must be given structured, sequential, direct instruction in the relationship between letters and sounds. Whole-language advocates believe phonics should be taught, but only in the context of reading and writing, not as discrete skills.

Whole language, argue its critics, allows some children to "fall through the cracks." Without the scaffolding that direct teaching of phonics provides, some children don't get it. They don't learn the connections between letters of the alphabet and the sounds they represent, and they struggle to read. Their reading gets worse as the material gets more complicated in third grade.

The argument against phonics, of course, is that it's boring. Drills, workbooks, exercises, basal readers—yawn. Many teachers insist that whole language makes students avid readers.

Teachers of whole language say they teach phonics as opportunities arise to talk about the sounds of letters. Proponents of the method insist that failure is more the fault of teachers who haven't learned how to teach whole language, rather than of the method itself. But as Chall points out, what good is a system if only the best practitioners can use it?

Meanwhile, as researchers debate the significance of the studies and test results, teachers—especially new teachers—are left hanging. Many are trained only in the methods favored by their professors, who extol one approach while damning the other. "New teachers are sure that one of the methods is very evil," says Mary Russo, principal of Boston's Mason Elementary School, "but they don't know which one it is."

Politics further complicates the issue. Historically, conservatives have favored phonics, representing a more traditional and controlled approach, while liberals have favored whole language, which allows teachers and students more choices. The political agenda may be irrelevant to the children, but it surely affects the decisions of the adults who choose the curricula. Conservative Christians are uncomfortable with whole language, points out Ellen Brinkley of Western Michigan University, because they don't like the idea of students constructing meaning out of texts—specifically the Bible, which they consider to be the literal word of God.

"This is political and not educational," whole-language theorist Ken Goodman of the University of Arizona says of the curriculum changes in California. "The whole assessment of a crisis is unwarranted. The whole thing started with the elections in several states in November 1994, California being one."

"Phonics is a method," says one administrator. "It's one of many things in the teaching of reading."

Goodman says the poor reading scores in California are absurd and reflect the bias of the testmakers. He emphasizes the involvement of right-wing political groups in the pro-phonics camp and says researchers like Chall are being used by those whose agenda is to destroy public education.

At the same time, many educators who would never identify themselves

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as right-wingers or even as conservatives are concerned about problems in using a strict whole-language approach.

Reality Versus Zealotry

Increasingly, researchers are finding better results from teachers who take a balanced approach—that is, classrooms that offer rich literature, writing, lots of shared reading, and direct instruction in phonics as well—especially with children from disadvantaged backgrounds. A 1995 study by Karin Dahl of Ohio State University and Penny Freppon of the University of Cincinnati compared children in basic-skills and whole-language classes and concluded that the latter showed greater gains in reading comprehension and became more independent readers. But the whole-language classrooms they studied provided abundant instruction in basic skills.

Many teachers, however, have been taught only one method of reading instruction. In turn, they teach only what they were taught. In California, Glen Thomas notes, teachers are required to take only one course in reading methodology. "That's not going to be enough," he says.

Experienced teachers have known all along that you can't reach every kid the same way. Keith Stanovich of the University of Toronto notes that teachers themselves, in their classrooms, are "increasingly finding the middle way."

Bill Honig, the former superintendent of public instruction for the state of California, believes that teachers—even those who love whole language—will readily adopt a balanced approach if it works. "In California, half the kids coming in to second grade can't read," says Honig, now a professor of education at San Francisco State University. "And it's not just California. It's all over. So teachers are willing to try new things. The best antidote to a zealous philosophy is reality."

While the zealots argue, some teachers and schools have created pockets of successful reading instruction. They use different names to describe what they do: a balanced approach, an integrated curriculum, whole language with phonics, phonics-based and literature-enriched. What's important is that the strategy appears to work.

Doing What Works

Three different schools in the Boston area offer evidence that experienced teachers using a middle-of-the-road approach succeed in teaching beginners to read. At the Mason School (an inner-city public school), the Oakdale School (a suburban public school), and the Dexter-Southfield Schools (two affiliated single-sex independent schools), virtually every first-grader learns to read at least a little.

What do these schools have in common? All have relatively small classes—no more than 16 children per room. All use basal readers with controlled vocabularies, as well as a rich trove of children's literature and child-authored books and stories. All hold daily writing workshops and shared reading sessions. And all use structured phonics programs, often with workbooks.

At the Mason School in the Roxbury

section of Boston, teachers and administrators have been collaborating for five years on building a successful reading program, adapting the whole-language approach the Boston system had instituted. "Boston has been kind of all or nothing," says Principal Mary Russo. "With whole language, they thought, 'This is it: the magic bullet.' So they went overboard. What they discovered was that children weren't performing and they still can't read.

"Our reading program was a response to the question 'How can we keep as many kids as possible from falling through the cracks?' Five years ago Mason was the least chosen school of Boston's elementary schools. Now we're 11 percent above capacity and we have waiting lists for the early childhood program and grade one. It worked." Reading test scores back up Russo's claim. Mason students used to rank in the 40th to 50th percentile in reading. Now they are up to 90th.

In Gwen Stith's first-grade class at Mason, students are taught one of three phonics programs, chosen to fit the individual child's needs. On a typical day, Stith and an assistant, Maria Costa, combine whole-language and direct instruction as they weave different strands in and out of the children's tasks.

They begin with the writing workshop, where children write stories of their own choosing. Siobhan is writing about bows and arrows. She has brought a rather advanced book about Indians from home and she says, "I don't read it, I think about it. I look at the pictures." But then Siobhan writes her own story from what she sees in the pictures, using words she knows and invented spelling for words she doesn't yet know. The class then gathers to talk about problems in their writing and how they have solved them.

Next comes the shared reading of a "big book." First they read an old favorite aloud together. Then they "walk through" a new book, with Stith covering up the words as the children look for details in the pictures and suggest scenarios for what's happening. Stith encourages the children to make predictions before reading: "In the three little pigs story the pig had a bag on a stick over his shoulder, just like this mouse. Why did the pig have it? What might the mouse do with it?"

Now the children split up into reading groups. A group with Stith reads a story about Angus and the circus and receives direct instruction in how to decode a new word: *saw*. Stith blocks the *a* and *w* and asks the children to sound out the *s* sound. After reading the story, the children work on a phonics worksheet on *see/saw*.

In another group, Costa reads a story from the basal reader. She prepares the children for new words by showing them flashcards with the words written on them. The children sound out the words. A third group of children is working on the poem "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star," copying it from a big board, while a fourth group works with a young City Year volunteer on sentence structure, pasting words together to make a sentence that tells about the book they have just read in their group.

Creativity with Structure

At the Oakdale School in Dedham, Massachusetts, whole-language methods are also combined with direct phonics instruction. "When I first came to Dedham," says Alison Peternell, a first-grade teacher at Oakdale, "they gave me the phonics workbook and I said, 'No way! I'm not using it. This is not what I was trained to do.'"

> ***"New teachers are sure that one of the methods is very evil, but they don't know which one it is."***

But Peternell did start to use the book—and she ended up changing her mind about its value. Now she won't give it up.

"The workbook structures how I teach phonics," she says. "But that's just one component. Today we read a story to look at what the book was saying—the whole language part—and another day we'll do the phonics of the story. They're all components that bring it all together for kids."

The first period of the day at Oakdale is for writing. Peternell has written on the board at the front of the class, in large letters, "If you *went* to the moon, what *would* you do?" The kids then write their own stories.

At circle time, a few of the children read what they've written. The teacher asks each child questions about his story or tells what she likes about it. Brittany reads a story she wrote at home about the moon. "Lots of times kids get very excited about what we're studying," says Peternell.

Next, one child is asked for a "sentence of the day" and Peternell writes the sentence on the board as the children spell it out, word by word. There is lots of practice with phonics here: "Could someone come up and circle the *oo* sound? Could someone circle the *ay* sound? That's right: yester*day*, like in *play* and *may* and *bay*."

Short "a" is the next topic of the day, and the kids sing a song, "I Like to Eat Apples and Bananas," to gain familiarity with the short "a" sound. The children read a poem out loud together, with many short "a" words. They talk about the poem, read it together, and identify the short "a" words. Then comes the phonics worksheet, for practicing the skills they have been working on.

"People often think of whole language as 'Whatever you do is fine—go off and read something,'" says Peternell. "You can't do it that way. The class will get out of control. If I get a phonics sheet back that's messed up, then I know I need to work with that particular child—or maybe the whole class—on that topic.

"It's now December. I've had them for three months and these kids can read. They can pick up a book and read. And their writing has improved dramatically. They can sound out words phonetically. They can write something with meaning."

The Dexter-Southfield independent schools in Brookline, Massachusetts, offer what they call a traditional phonics-based approach, but their program, too, is in fact a combination of strategies. "It's very directed," says reading teacher Deborah Harrison. "This is reading, this is phonics, this is writing. The children know it's that part of the day."

Yet the students spend much of their day writing stories and journals and reading literature—just what whole language calls for. "It's more of a language arts program," says Jackie Wright, the school's administrator. "Phonics is a method. It's one of many things in the teaching of reading. There are some children who aren't going to get phonics without specific instruction in it. There isn't one be-all method of teaching."

A Call for Consensus

Educators in Cape Elizabeth, Maine, a small, middle-class community with a highly educated populace, struggled through the first five years of a new whole-language regimen. No system-

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atic phonics instruction was given before third grade. Then tests in 1991 showed that 42 percent of the second-graders were reading below grade level and parents complained that their kids couldn't read. Constance Goldman, then a brand-new superintendent, balanced the whole-language curriculum with more direct skills instruction. Do what works, she told the teachers.

"What we've been trying to build is a common-sense amalgam," Goldman says. The school system has not yet published recent test results, but Goldman claims reading scores have improved. "It's nice to think that if you read to children they'll love to read. But it isn't just wanting to read. It's learning to decode."

Now scholars, including Marilyn Adams, have begun to call for consensus on the balanced approach. In his new book, *Teaching Our Children to Read*, Bill Honig says that both a literature-driven and language-rich reading program and a comprehensive, organized skill development program are essential. Gerald Duffy, professor of teacher education at Michigan State University, encourages teachers to use elements of whole language, direct phonics instruction, or both, as the situation calls for them.

It is time for the debate to cool down and for advocates on both sides to recognize the wisdom of Jackie Wright's philosophy: "Teach what works."

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